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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Putin meets with Sharon

Vladimir Putin acknowledged Israel's desire for peace during a meeting with Ariel Sharon.

"We know that Israel is striving for peace," the Russian president told the Israeli prime minister in Moscow on Monday.

Putin said the Jewish state has "suffered a lot in the past decades" and that Moscow would like to play an active role in an Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Sharon called Putin a friend of Israel and invited him to visit the Jewish state. Putin also told Sharon that plans are under way to open a Holocaust-related exhibition in Russia's State History Museum, located in Moscow's Red Square.

Sharon met with members of the Russian Jewish community on Monday night.

European poll: Israel is threat

More than half of Europeans think Israel is the greatest threat to world peace, according to a new poll.

The results of the poll published Monday by the European Union show that 59 percent of about 7,500 Europeans polled named Israel as the gravest threat to world peace.

Fifty-three percent of respondents said Iran, North Korea and the United States pose threats to world peace. "Europeans seem blind to Israeli victims and suffering," said Haim Assaraf, spokesman at Israel's mission to the European Union.

Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom downplayed the poll's significance, saying it is important not to give too much credence to a single poll.

'Gold Train' evidence emerges

Attorneys representing survivors in the Hungarian "Gold Train" lawsuit filed an amended complaint.

The complaint filed last Friday includes new evidence that bolsters claims that the United States "modified World War II policies and auctioned priceless Jewish valuables to cover up widespread looting by senior military officials and to fill in budget gaps that arose in the restoration program following World War II," attorneys in the class-action lawsuit said in a news release.

The Gold Train carried a shipment of Jewish property seized by the Nazis that fell into U.S. hands at the end of World War II. Its cargo included everything from rings and watches to gold teeth.

Progress on Falash Mura seen closer as advocates and Israeli officials meet

By Uriel Heilman

NEW YORK (JTA) — Increased pressure from American Jewish organizational officials is driving preliminary talks on a new deal to bring thousands of Ethiopian Jews to Israel before famine takes a heavy toll on the community remaining in Ethiopia.

Coming on the eve of a federation-sponsored trip to Ethiopia, federation leaders, advocates for Ethiopian Jews, representatives of Jewish humanitarian groups and Israeli government officials met recently in Jerusalem to discuss new ways of expediting the emigration process for thousands of Falash Mura left in Ethiopia.

The Falash Mura are Ethiopians whose Jewish ancestors converted to Christianity, often under social pressure, but who now practice Judaism and whose Jewishness is accepted by all three major religious denominations, and by Israel's chief rabbinate.

Critics of deals to bring the Falash Mura to Israel charge that many left in Ethiopia are claiming Jewish ancestry merely to escape the famine and hardship of Africa.

In a landmark decision last February, Israel's Cabinet voted to immediately verify the Jewish ancestry of some 19,000 Falash Mura so they could be brought to Israel. Since 1998, Israel has absorbed about 2,500 Falash Mura immigrants per year.

In the months since the Cabinet decision, however, little action has been taken and the verification process has stalled, prompting advocates for Ethiopian Jewry to blame Israel's interior minister, Avraham Poraz, for foot-dragging. Poraz, who is responsible for implementing the Cabinet decision, declined to comment for this story.

At the heart of the debate is the exact number of Falash Mura left in Ethiopia, and the cost to Israel of absorbing the immigrants.

Participants said the closed-door meeting in Jerusalem on Oct. 23 was the first time an agreement was proposed with the potential to satisfy both skeptical Israeli officials like Poraz — who fear that bringing the Falash Mura to Israel will open the floodgates to an unknown number with dubious claims to Jewish ancestry — and Jewish activists seeking to rescue Ethiopian Jews from famine and bring them to the Jewish homeland.

"At the meeting, a proposal was brought to the table that reasonable people believe should satisfy all reasonable objections to the issue," said one participant.

That view was confirmed by other participants of the meeting, most of whom refused to comment publicly about the discussions.

The preliminary proposal raised at the meeting would involve expediting the Falash Mura emigration while guaranteeing that no more than those already accounted for are allowed to come to Israel under this process. U.S. Jewish groups would help bankroll the Falash Mura's absorption in Israel, and the Jewish humanitarian groups working in Ethiopia would shut down operations there.

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, one of only two Jewish groups running relief operations in Ethiopia, said it would welcome such a deal.

"We would be happy to close down if the Falash Mura issue were resolved," said Amir Shaviv, JDC assistant executive vice president. "We're there to maintain medical services. If these people were to go to Israel, we wouldn't need to be there anymore."

The exact details of the proposed agreement have yet to be worked out, and it remains to be seen how quickly a deal could be implemented or whether, in fact, there exists sufficient political will to see a deal through.

Until a deal is worked out to enforce the Cabinet decision, Ethiopia advocates say, the risks of death and disease for the thousands remaining in Ethiopia are growing.

"The Falash Mura have always lived in the most deplorable of conditions, and now

MIDEAST FOCUS

Strike struck down

A last-minute court injunction curtailed a strike that would have brought Israel to a virtual standstill.

The Histadrut labor federation, which opposes public-spending cuts drafted for the 2004 budget, acceded to Monday's order limiting its strike to four hours. The court called on the Histadrut and Finance Ministry to continue negotiations until its next hearing, scheduled for Thursday.

Strike fears had prompted Israelis to stock up on fuel and other provisions, and early actions by ground crews at Tel Aviv's Ben-Gurion Airport disrupted some takeoffs and landings.

Suspected killer arrested

A Palestinian suspected of killing an Israeli child in a June shooting surrendered to police.

Tarek Hassin, a member of Islamic Jihad, is believed to have shot Noam Leibovitch, 7, and wounded her sister, brother and grandfather in an attack on the Trans-Israel Highway.

Israeli indicted for treason

An Israeli man was indicted Sunday on charges of assisting the enemy in a time of war.

Hanan Yadgarov, nicknamed the "Jewish bomb engineer," was arrested recently after selling a bomb to an undercover police officer posing as an Arab. Yadgarov, 28, is an immigrant from the former Soviet Union.

Israeli hacks Mossad Web site

An Israeli man was arrested for hacking into a Web site run by the Mossad intelligence agency.

The suspect, 23, who was not identified, was charged in a Jerusalem court, media reports said. The hacked Web site was set up by Israel's Mossad last year to widen the pool of potential recruits, The Associated Press reported.



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there is famine and a malaria epidemic, which is probably the most virulent in history," said Ricki Lieberman, chief operating officer and director of public affairs at the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, or NACOEJ.

"All of these factors are coming together to make the Israeli government understand that it must act effectively and quickly, and that the American Jewish community must help NACOEJ feed and help this community stay alive until they can get to Israel."

NACOEJ helps run relief compounds for the Falash Mura in the cities of Addis Ababa and Gondar. The group provides food and Jewish education at the compounds, and the JDC provides medical care and nutritional support for children. The groups do not provide the Falash Mura — most of whom came to the cities from remote villages in hopes of emigrating to Israel — with housing.

In Israel, advocates for the Ethiopians are pursuing legal action to force Poraz to accelerate the emigration process. But the prospect raised at the recent meeting of an agreement between Poraz, Jewish humanitarian groups working in Ethiopia and U.S. federation leaders could render such a move superfluous.

Those at the Oct. 23 meeting included Poraz; the president of the United Jewish Communities federation group, Stephen Hoffman; the chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel, Sallai Meridor; NACOEJ officials; New York and Philadelphia federation officials; JDC representatives, and others.

Participants said the meeting was convened at the request of Hoffman, who is facing pressure from Jewish federations to push Israeli officials on the issue. Hoffman declined to comment for this story.

"When the famine really started to take hold in Ethiopia, many in our community became concerned," said Sheryl Fox Adler, director of Israel and other international concerns at the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston. Some U.S. federation leaders are planning to visit Ethiopia on a fact-finding mission next week.

Observers said the heightened interest by U.S. Jewish leaders on the Falash Mura is helping propel action by the Israeli government — and, specifically, by Poraz.

"Now he's not facing a fringe group like NACOEJ but the weight of the American Jewish community," said one participant in the Oct. 23 meeting. "That's a sea change."

Earlier this year, several U.S. congressmen admonished Poraz on the issue, including Reps. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.) and Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.).

When 4,000 Falash Mura were brought to Israel in 1998, many thought they were the last group of Jews from Ethiopia. But then another 14,000 people turned up at the compounds in Addis Ababa and Gondar, and the Jewish relief work there continued.

In 1999, government surveyors counted 26,000 people at the compounds, but a few thousand have since emigrated to Israel. Estimates of the number of Falash Mura left in Ethiopia range from 15,000 to 24,000, with about 19,000 at the compounds.

February's Cabinet decision called for bringing the Falash Mura to Israel not under the Law of Return — which grants automatic citizenship to Jews, their children and grandchildren — but under the seldom-used Law of Entry, which has been used to grant citizenship to foreigners for humanitarian reasons and family reunification.

That move enabled Israel to impose a requirement on the would-be immigrants to prove maternal linkage to Jewish ancestry; hence the need to verify their Jewish claims.

The Finance Ministry estimates that it costs \$100,000 to absorb each Ethiopian immigrant. But Shlomo Molla, a Jewish Agency consultant on Ethiopian immigration, says that figure is inflated. Others say the figure is closer to \$25,000 per immigrant.

In any case, advocates say, the cost would be borne over many years, U.S. Jewish groups would offer assistance and Israel has enough money even with its current recession to absorb the immigrants.

"It's not a question of money," said Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, president of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews and a board member of the Jewish Agency and the JDC. Eckstein attended the Oct. 23 meeting. "If these people are brought, the government certainly is going to look to groups like the UJC and the worldwide Jewish community for assistance."

Irwin Cotler, a member of Canada's Parliament and a long-time legal adviser to Ethiopian Jews who was at the Oct. 23 meeting, said the question at stake is, "Will it happen through an agreement now to bring them with all deliberate speed, or only after another series of court cases, and more people die, and more kids are undernourished. That is the moral choice before us." □

JEWISH WORLD

Feinstein likes Geneva deal

The United States should use the controversial "Geneva accord" to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, Sen. Dianne Feinstein said.

The unofficial accord, negotiated by moderate Palestinians and dovish Israelis lacking a mandate, envisions two states along pre-1967 borders and a shared Jerusalem, and is vague on the demand that Palestinian refugees be allowed to return to Israel.

"After looking at this proposal, I really believe that it offers both opportunity and specifics," Feinstein told the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington on Monday. "It has broad popular support from both the Israeli and the Palestinian public. And I think it should be used by the United States to move toward settlement."

The Jewish Democrat from California criticized Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's insistence on an end to terrorism before resuming talks as unrealistic.

Jews back charity bill

Five Jewish groups joined Christian groups in backing legislation offering tax incentives for charitable contributions. The Charity Assistance Recovery and Empowerment bill would make it easier to deduct charitable donations without itemization and to donate from IRA funds.

Signatories included the Agudath Israel of America, the Orthodox Union, the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, the American Jewish Committee and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

Court rejects Moore appeal

The Supreme Court refused to hear an Alabama justice's appeal to display the Ten Commandments in the state's judicial building.

Monday's decision ends Judge Roy Moore's legal options and means the Ten Commandments monument will not be permitted in the building. The ruling also ends a battle that received nationwide attention over the summer, as Christians mounted protests in front of the judicial building.

Belarussian school closes

Officials in Minsk, Belarus, refused to renew a lease on the city's only Hebrew school.

The school rented space for its weekly classes at an evening school for the deaf until the education authorities refused to renew the annual lease for the Jewish school, without giving an explanation for the decision. Classes at the Hebrew school, which first opened in 1999 and had 70 students, have ended.

The move came a month after authorities shut down the International Humanitarian Institute, which offered the only university-level program in Jewish studies in Minsk.

World Jewish Congress embarks on major organizational overhaul

By Joe Berkofsky

NEW YORK (JTA) — The World Jewish Congress is embarking on a major rebuilding project as it searches for a new identity.

The leading 67-year-old Jewish organization, an umbrella group for more than 100 Jewish communities around the world, has appointed a task force to oversee the reorganization, which could be completed by 2005, officials said.

"This is a top-to-bottom overhaul," said Israel Singer, chairman of the group's governing board.

The move comes nearly two years after the WJC, which led the fight for Holocaust restitution in the 1990s, underwent upheaval among its professional leadership.

It also comes about three months after an unusually public and bitter spat between the group's longtime president, Edgar Bronfman, and its senior vice president, Isi Leibler. WJC officials say that plans for the changes long preceded the spat.

"That turned into a mudslinging contest, but it had nothing to do with setting up the task force," said Elan Steinberg, the group's former executive director, who left the organization nearly two years ago and recently returned as senior adviser.

In August, the politically left-of-center Bronfman and right-of-center Leibler clashed after Bronfman co-signed a letter to President Bush backing the "road map" peace plan and criticizing Israel's security fence.

Leibler demanded that Bronfman apologize or resign because he had acted without the group's approval. Bronfman refused and said Leibler should be stripped of his title.

The war of words between Bronfman, 74, the former chief executive of the Seagram Company and a leading philanthropist who has presided over the WJC since 1981, and Leibler, a Jerusalem-based Australian travel magnate and major funder, revived a longtime debate in the Jewish organizational world over whether Diaspora Jewish leaders should publicly challenge Israel.

In an Oct. 23 letter to the organization announcing the task force to revise the group's 30-year-old charter, Bronfman said parts of the charter "have become archaic or irrelevant."

"In particular, recent exchanges have demonstrated the need to review the existing structure and ensure good governance and transparency in the operations of the WJC," Bronfman wrote, echoing calls he made at the group's 2001 plenary to create a "vision for the 21st century supported by the structural changes that can bring that about."

Bronfman added that he hoped the group would "avoid public debate" about the task force's work. "I therefore call on all members of the World Jewish Congress family to suspend all exchanges relating to past differences and to work jointly to achieve and promote the goals of the WJC," he said.

After consulting with the group's executive, Bronfman said he had appointed Tel Aviv University's Yoram Dinstein, who was president of TAU from 1991 to 1998, to lead the task force.

This year, TAU awarded Bronfman an honorary doctorate.

The panel will also include Steinberg, who will help Dinstein put the panel's recommendations into effect, while Singer and Leibler will be "permanent observers."

Leibler was in India to receive the government's Mahatma Gandhi prize for Indo-Israel relations and could not be reached for comment. An assistant to Bronfman referred all questions to Singer, who said the panel would draft new bylaws at a time when the organization needs to consider new leaders.

Bronfman has said he will likely step down as president by 2005. Steinberg said he had "no idea" who Bronfman might tap to succeed him, but the new leader would benefit from starting with a "blank slate" organizationally.

Many of the group's leaders joined the group during the 1960s as young men, and now the WJC and other Jewish organizations need young leaders to replace them, Singer said. Perhaps the biggest challenge facing the WJC, as other Jewish groups, is its search for meaning, Singer said.

"This is a bad, overused '60s word, but you have to become relevant," Singer said. "Jewish life in general, from an organizational viewpoint, needs to be renewed." □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Wolfowitz support for petition could give push to peace effort***By Ron Kampeas*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — A grass-roots petition for Israeli-Palestinian peace, chugging along slowly for months, took off last week when a powerful and surprising name was attached to it.

Paul Wolfowitz, the U.S. deputy secretary of defense who is a close adviser to President Bush, voiced strong support for a plan formulated by former Israeli Shin Bet security chief Ami Ayalon and Palestinian intellectual Sari Nusseibeh.

"There are thousands of Israelis and Palestinians who feel the same way" that President Bush does, Wolfowitz told a Georgetown University audience, referring to Bush's support for side-by-side Israeli and Palestinian states under the "road map" peace plan.

"How do I know?" he said. "Well, right now there is a significant grassroots movement that has already gotten some 90,000 Israeli signatures and some 60,000 Palestinian signatures in support of principles that look very much like the road map favoring a two-state solution."

Wolfowitz's comments, buried in a lengthy prepared speech, surprised Israeli, American Jewish and Palestinian officials.

Wolfowitz has a reputation as a hawk, having built his career on arguing that a failure to deal decisively with terror and tyranny can be fatal. That is precisely Israel's argument in its current dealings with terrorist groups and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat. Wolfowitz also has emphasized repeatedly that Israel's military strength is key to its survival.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's landslide election in February 2001, and his closeness to Bush, supposedly had buried notions of an Israeli withdrawal from virtually the entire West Bank and eastern Jerusalem, which had informed peace talks at the Egyptian resort of Taba in the previous government's dying days.

The Ayalon-Nusseibeh plan appears to be modeled closely on the Taba talks.

"Everyone in Israel is reading this very carefully," an Israeli official said. "If it comes from Wolfowitz, it's serious."

Wolfowitz's support could mark a sea change for the Bush administration. Until now, the hallmark of Bush's Middle East policy has been to avoid the talk of theoretical endgames. Instead, Bush has insisted that Israel and the Palestinians come to an accommodation before the United States steps in.

By contrast, the one-page document Wolfowitz praised envisions a division of land along the pre-1967 armistice lines, uproots Israeli settlers from a future Palestinian state, establishes a physical connection between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, divides Jerusalem and quashes Palestinian refugees' hopes for a "right of return" to Israel.

The Ayalon-Nusseibeh proposal still lacks the specifics of the "Geneva accord," which was negotiated much more publicly by leading Israeli doves and Palestinian moderates.

According to leaked reports, those negotiators agreed to hand over to the Palestinians the Israeli city of Ariel in the West Bank and did not rule out a "right of return." Their agreement, due to be signed in Switzerland on Nov. 20, has been widely derided in Israel; some hawks have called it treasonous.

The noise around the Geneva accord in Israel and Europe makes the attention Ayalon and Nusseibeh are getting here stand

out. The New York Times ran an editorial last week on the petition drive, mentioning the Geneva agreement only as an afterthought.

Part of the reason for the duo's sympathetic hearing is that they are less confrontational than the Geneva negotiators, and they have unassailable credentials. Ayalon shepherded the Shin Bet through one of its most difficult periods after it failed to protect Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin from assassination in 1995.

Nusseibeh has pressed for accommodation despite derision from Arafat and others. Ayalon has said he wants the petition to garner some quarter million signatures from each side before taking it to the Israeli and Palestinian leaders.

After a summer of campaigning, the drive has stalled at about 60,000 signatures on the Palestinian side and 100,000 from Israelis.

"Our hope is to take this single page and put it inside the road map," Nusseibeh said.

Wolfowitz made the same connection, though experts and officials were cautious about how far the United States would go with the idea.

"It would be over-extrapolating to say that, beyond the commitment to a two-state solution — which is already policy — exact lines would be announced at a speech by an official who doesn't deal with this issue," said David Makovsky of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Ziad Abu Amr, a leading Palestinian legislator from Gaza, expressed skepticism that the plan would take hold.

"This plan is very controversial, and with only 60,000 Palestinians and 100,000 Israelis, it is not a breakthrough," he said.

Whatever its popular support, the plan might be less important than the frustration with Israel Wolfowitz expressed when he talked about the plan.

He also said, "There's no question that the president is prepared to put pressure on the Israelis to change."

Bush and his aides clearly place most of the blame for the continuing violence on Arafat. But U.S. officials say they also see moderate Palestinians ready to succeed Arafat and worry that Sharon will prejudice a workable outcome by carving up the West Bank through settlement building and the security fence.

The signals are not coming only from Wolfowitz. Administration officials closely monitored the brouhaha that erupted last week between Sharon's government and the army chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Moshe Ya'alon, who complained that restrictive measures were increasing Palestinian violence rather than reducing it.

"We believe that it is exceedingly important that the Israelis improve the lives of the Palestinian people," Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, told a group of foreign journalists Oct. 30, the same day as Wolfowitz's speech.

Much of the impetus for the tough talk stems from administration efforts to earn credibility — especially in the Arab world — for the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq.

"Clearly, one huge factor in our relations with the Muslim world, as well as one of the greatest obstacles to peace in that region, is the continuing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians," Wolfowitz said.

Israelis and Arabs are closely watching what happens next. The United States has some leverage with \$3 billion in loan guarantees due to Israel next year; it has pledged to deduct the cost of new building in West Bank settlements and could also deduct the \$1 billion-plus cost of the fence.

Whatever happens, supporters of the Nusseibeh-Ayalon plan appreciate the nudge forward. □